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ABSTRACT

Following a brief summary of research relating to midlife crisis, a theory of the midlife crisis is presented that is based on the philosophical insights of Plato and Heidegger: The emotional pain at midlife is associated with a collapse of a person's ontic field (relationships with others, to things, and to institutions) or a stagnation of a person's field of life-relationships and, in a sense, the person dies but is beckoned to create a new ontic field. A two-page outline of a model program (designed so the participants will be able to identify characteristics of the midlife crisis and techniques for the successful negotiation of the crisis) consisting of ten ninety-minute weekly sessions is presented followed by a brief commentary on each session. The ten sessions, involving the use of lecture, discussion, buzz sessions, and reports from student project teams, cover the following content areas: The Midlife Crisis: What, When, and Why; Depression, Chemistry, and Medical Treatment; Troubled Adults: Counseling Techniques; Saul Bellow's "Herzog," John Updike's "The Centaur"; Symbols of the Midlife Crisis in Poetry; How I Handled the Midlife Crisis; and How to Negotiate the Midlife Crisis. This paper concludes with a brief discussion of suggestions for program implementation. (EM)

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THE MIDLIFE CRISIS AND EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING

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The Midlife Crisis and Educational Programming

Abstract

Research relating to the midlife crisis is summarized. A theory of the midlife crisis based on the philosophical insights of Plato and Heidegger is presented. It is theorized that emotional pain at midlife is associated with a collapse of a person's ontic field or a stagnation of a person's field of life-relationships. A model program is outlined. The program addresses the educational needs related to the midlife crisis.

Something happens, at midlife or thereabouts, to some people. They feel overtaken by a sense of the futility of life. The experience can express itself as a form of ennui, a grief that the center will not hold, a dull ache of meaninglessness, an intuition of being bereft of goals, a taste of ashes, a dark night of the soul, depression.

To "name" the experience of the midlife crisis in terms of a set pattern of symptoms is perhaps impossible. The quality of the emotional pain associated with the midlife crisis varies from individual to individual. For many the onset of the crisis is related chronologically to what is conventionally known as "midlife." Others experience the critical pain in early or late adulthood. Some never experience the crisis.

The onset of the crisis and its pain may be sudden or gradual. The intensity of the crisis may be extreme or mild. The duration of the critical period may be brief or lengthy. The crisis may be resolved satisfactorily or remain through the lifespan as an unwelcome guest, a haunting demon.

A wild variability surrounds the experience and seems to be the foremost constant. Atypicality is a predominant characteristic when the counselor or researcher listens to people describe the attributes and nuances of their individual crises. This feature of variability is most likely related to what Gordon Allport suggested years ago: human beings grow according to their own specific idioms.[1]

Research

It is an understatement to say that the midlife crisis has not been investigated exhaustively. What data are available, however, are extremely valuable for the possible construction of a theory or paradigm that may assist us in our wanderings toward an Ithaca of intelligibility.

One of the first researchers to study the adult lifespan in a systematic fashion was Charlotte Buhler.[2] She noted that many are forced to reorient their lives during what she called "the climacteric years." Berniece Neugarten[3] discovered that at midlife people generally become concerned about protective strategies for bodily well-being. Their interest in the aging process becomes existential rather than academic. People begin measuring their life-times not from the distance from birth, but in terms of the temporal distance toward death. People begin to feel ontologically vulnerable.

Vaillant and McArthur found that men in their 40's experienced these years as more tumultuous than adolescence. Around age 40 there took place an agonizing self-reappraisal and instinctual reawakening. The researchers also uncovered something about the post-midlife period. "However marred by depression and turmoil life may be, it often heralds a new stage of man."[4]

Roger Gould's research focused on adult development in terms of the impact of chronological change on individuals' subjective senses of the

world. The 35-43 age group, all men, was characterized by "...an existential questioning of self, values, and life itself, but with a change of tone toward quiet desperation and an increasing awareness of the time squeeze."[5]

Daniel Levinson and his associates referred to the midlife crisis as the "mid-life transition."[6] The transition usually reaches its peak in men in the early 40's. There is a three to four year period around age 45 in which the transition comes to an end and a new life structure emerges. During the 40's there is a sense of bodily decline and a wounding of omnipotence fantasies when a person becomes aware of personal mortality.

What stands forth as an overarching concept in research studies is the theme of death-approaching. Elliott Jaques maintained that the midlife crisis is a reaction to an awareness of personal death, an awareness that manifests itself in some form in everyone.[7] Death confronts the person not as a notional reality but as an existential inevitability. The proposition used in logic texts to illustrate a major premise in a syllogism --- "All men are mortal" --- begins to take on an alarming significance it never before possessed. The theme of death-approaching: this is the place to begin building a theory of the midlife crisis.

Heidegger's Insight; Plato's Myth

A fruitful theory of the midlife crisis can be formulated by examining some ideas of two philosophers. One of the philosophers, Martin Heidegger, represents the modern period; Plato represent classical Greek philosophy. The latter's impact, of course, on the development of western thought has been immense for more than two millenia.

Heidegger[8] refers to the being of being human as Dasein, a word that means literally "being-there." The connotative senses of the term, however, are multiple and complex. Dasein is present to itself not as a mere subject or object in the world, but as a subject-object. Dasein is present to itself as being-in-time, as being thrust into the future, into possibility. Dasein is also present to itself as being thrown toward the inevitability of Nothingness, a possibility that outstrips all possibilities. When Dasein is present to itself as being hurled toward the Void, Dasein's mood is dread. The being of being human, according to Heidegger, is Sein zum Tode: being-toward-death.

The truth about Dasein is usually neglected and unseen. This is due to the fallennness of Dasein. The fallennesn of Dasein into the workaday world ordinarily prevents Dasein from being present to itself authentically. The fallenness of Dasein is characterized by idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity. Idle talk trivializes Dasein's thrownness toward death and Dasein is interpreted superficially. Curiosity does not seek the leisurely examination of Dasein "...but rather seeks restlessness and the excitement of continual novelty and changing encounters."[9] Ambiguity is the climate in which idle talk and curiosity occur. "When, in our everyday Being-with-one-another, we encounter the sort of thing that is

accessible to everyone, and about which anyone can say anything, it soon becomes impossible to decide what is disclosed in a genuine understanding, and what is not."[10]

Dasein is veiled, hidden, covered by fallenness into the everyday world. In its fallenness, Dasein is not being-before-truth --- something it must be if it is to confront itself authentically. Heidegger's concept of truth is derived etymologically from the Greek a-lethea and has the sense of "uncovering." A number of synonyms for truth may be employed: unveiledness, unhiddenness, disclosedness, apocalypse, revealment. The midlife crisis occurs when Dasein becomes unveiled to itself.

Heidegger's insight, put simply, is this: that to be fully human is to realize that one must die; that the very being of being human conveys this realization to us; that the time process is the messenger to the being of being human. When lived time delivers the message of our mortality, the truth about the being of being human is disclosed. When the message is heard, it is for us an apocalyptic moment --- a "moment" that may be stretched out over a number of days, months or even years. While we are thrown toward the future from the first minute of our existence, this thrownness must pick up velocity before it is realized as a thrownness toward death.

To move from Heidegger, it may be said that when someone is grasped, and perhaps throttled, by the realization of personal death, a death of sorts occurs. The midlife crisis is essentially the proleptic experience of one's own death. Prolepsis: the anticipatory presence of a future event. What triggers this proleptic experience is the deterioration of what can be called one's ontic field.

A person's ontic field is understood as the complexus of all relationships a person has developed over the years. relationships with others. to things, to institutions. In a broader sense the ontic field can be taken to mean the sum total of a person's values, goals, and activities. The ontic field is the arena of relationships in which one lives everyday life.

When the ontic field deteriorates or collapses, a person, in a sense, dies. The pain of this experience may be repressed, endured stoically, or "used" as the occasion to create a new ontic field, a new person. The emotional pain associated with the midlife crisis is an invitational pain. The pain is a messenger that beckons a person to a resurrection. It is at this point we must turn to Plato.

Standing Before Lachesis

The midlife crisis is appropriately named. The word crisis is derived from the Greek verb krinein and means "to decide." The pain of the midlife crisis situates a person before Lachesis, the Daughter of Necessity.

Plato's Republic is concluded with a rather lenghty myth concerning what happens to souls after death. The myth endeavors to explain

the concept of individual responsibility and the notion of transmigration of souls. Or more precisely, the myth expresses the idea of existential choice. The myth, a favorite of existentialist philosophers, is the Myth of Er. Plato states that Er was a brave man, a native of Pamphlia. He was killed in battle and was already on the funeral pyre, when he came to life again and told the story of what he had seen in the other world.

Er's tale is instructive. He was placed by the Judges at a sort of crossroad between heaven and earth; he was told to listen and watch since he was to be a messenger to mortals about the world of the dead. Er witnessed souls coming from heaven, souls pure and clean who had not as yet been incarnated in earthly existence. He also saw souls "stained with the dust of travel." These had made the long journey through earthly existence and death. At the crossroad was a pleasant meadow where all of the souls gathered for a festival. Souls from heaven exchanged experiences with souls recently arrived from earth.

Er listened to the conversations in the meadow and soon learned that incurably wicked souls from earth were not present at the festival. They had been cast into The Pit. When the festival concluded, all the souls were led before Lachesis, the Daughter of Necessity. An Interpreter spoke for Lachesis and told the souls that they were present in order to decide upon a round of earthly life. The Interpreter set before the crowd of souls "...different types of life, far more in number than the souls who were to choose them."[11]

Plato interrupts the story at this juncture and speaks to Glaucon, "Then comes the moment, my dear Glaucon, when everything is at stake."[12] This is the moment of existential choice; the moment when a person must choose the self he will become.

Plato continues the telling of the myth. After each of the souls had chosen a life, they were lead before Lachesis who appointed to each a guardian angel. That evening every soul camped by the river Lethe, the river of forgetfulness. All were compelled to drink of its waters. As each soul drank the waters, he forgot everything that had transpired that day. When midnight came they were swept away like shooting stars to be born.

Er was not permitted to drink the water of the river Lethe since the gods wanted him to serve as a messenger to men. Er did not remember how he got there, but he awoke at his funeral pyre just before the mourners lit the blaze. "And so, my dear Glaucon, his tale was preserved from perishing..."[13] concludes Plato through the words of Socrates.

The Myth of Er, it was noted, is instructive. Not for what it tells us about the nether world but for what it reveals about the creative power of existential chice, the kind of choice that is made "when everything is at stake," the kind of choice that is capable of bringing a resurrection out of the proleptic experience of death. Existential choice is what the midlife crisis is all about. The pain associated with the midlife crisis is akin to Kazantzakis' Great Cry in Report to Greco,[14] the Cry that blows in our hearts commanding us to transcend, to move be-

yond what we are, to grow, to give birth to a better person. Were it not for this pain Dasein would never find authenticity, and myriads of men and women would continue to slouch through the best part of life as insensitive clods.

The pain of the midlife crisis invites persons to make new relationships with others and, perhaps, to sever old ties; to reassess their values and possibly embrace new modes of life; to lay aside tired goals and set forth on the open sea toward new ports of call; to climb out of existential ruts and onto the vast plains that extend in all directions; to become new again. To the person in the grips of the midlife crisis who asks "What can I do about my pain?" there is, perhaps, only one suitable response. "Be glad! Your pain may well be the pangs that accompany the birth of a new self."

Educational Programming

The phenomenon of the midlife crisis provides educators with a possible new direction for research relating to the orientation which moves adults to participate in educational programs. A more immediate response to the phenomenon, however, concerns the development of an educational program which addresses the theme of the midlife crisis. Such a program would probably be publicized as "Getting Ready for the Midlife Crisis" or "How to Get the Most Out of the Midlife Crisis." The global objective of the program can be expressed in the following terms: At the conclusion of the program participants will be able to identify characteristics of the midlife crisis and techniques for the successful negotiation of the crisis.

The proposed program, adapted appropriately to respond to the exigencies of particular settings, can be conducted in university continuing education divisions, libraries, churches, mental health centers, and a host of other institutional contexts. The model program consists of ten weekly sessions.

Each session lasts approximately 90 minutes. The program may be compressed or enlarged depending on particular circumstances. What follows is a) an outline of the model program and b) a commentary on each of the sessions in the program.

The Program Outline

Session #1

I. Introductions
   - A. Introductions of Participants
   - B. Introduction of Program Outline
   - C. Introduction of Content
     1. Lecture: "The Midlife Crisis: What, When, and Why?" - Teacher

II. Open Discussion: Questions and Comments

III. Formation of Teams: Responsibilities for Remaining Sessions

IV. Instructional Responsibility for Session #1 - Teacher

Session #2

I. Lecture: "Depression, Chemistry, and Medical Treatment" - Physician
II. Open Discussion: Questions and Comments
III. Brief Progress Reports: (From those responsible for Sessions 4, 5, 6)
IV. Instructional Responsibility for Session #2 - Teacher

Session #3

I. Lecture: "Troubled Adults: Counseling Techniques" - Clinical Psychologist
II. Open Discussion: Questions and Comments
III. Brief Progress Reports: (From those responsible for Sessions 7, 8, 9)
IV. Instructional Responsibility for Session #3 - Teacher

Session #4

I. Report on Saul Bellow's Herzog
   A. The Story Line
   B. Analysis of the Character in Terms of Midlife Crisis
II. Small Group Buzz Sessions
III. Reports from Buzz Sessions
IV. Instructional Responsibilities: _____ _____ _____

Session #5

I. Report on John Updike's The Centaur
   A. The Story Line
   B. Analysis of The Character in Terms of Midlife Crisis
II. Reaction Panel
III. Open Discussion: Questions and Comments

Session #6

I. Symbols of the Midlife Crisis in Poetry: Symposium
   A. Lecturette by _____.
   B. Lecturette by _____.
   C. Lecturette by _____.
II. Open Discussion: Questions and Comments
III. Instructional Responsibilities: _____ _____ _____

Session #7

I. Interview Project: Report
   A. Report by Project Leader, _____.
II. Open Discussion: Questions and Comments
III. Instructional Responsibilities: _____ _____ _____

Session #8

I. Interview Project: Report
   A. Report by Project Leader, _____.
II. Open Discussion: Questions and Comments
III. Instructional Responsibilities: _____ _____ _____

Session #9

I. "How I Handled the Midlife Crisis": Symposium
   A. Lecturette by _____.
   B. Lecturette by _____.
   C. Lecturette by _____.
II. Questions for the Panelists
III. Open Discussion: Questions and Comments
IV. Instructional Arrangements: _____ _____ _____

Session #10

I. Small Group Discussion: "How to Negotiate the Midlife Crisis"
II. Reports from Small Groups
III. Open Discussion: Questions and Comments
IV. Concluding Remarks: Teacher
V. Instructional Responsibilities: Teacher

The Program Outline: Commentary

Session #1

The initial session of the program is perhaps the most important. A number of tasks must be accomplished in a relatively brief time span to give direction and tone to the program. The first session can be described in reference to three key words. The words are introduction, discussion, and projects.

Three kinds of introduction should be undertaken during the first session. The participants should be introduced to one another. All too often it happens that adults enter an educational situation as strangers and leave as strangers. The model program on the midlife crisis presented here is predicated on the assumptions that the participants will work together in discussion of the issues that emerge, and that they will work together on projects and take on instructional responsibilities. The first task of the teacher, then, is to ask the participants to state

their names and provide background information concerning themselves. The introduction of participants is facilitated when the learners sit in a circular arrangment. The teacher may begin the round of introductions. This "modeling behavior" on the part of the teacher sets the mood for the introductions of the participants and gives them a general sense of what they should say by way of self introduction.

Secondly, the participants should be introduced to the program. In essence this means that the teacher distributes and discusses the program outline. The program outline will identify the date, topic, and activities scheduled for each session. Most people feel the need for structure and the program outline serves this need. The outline should not be taken, however, as something engraved in stone. Participants should be permitted the opportunity of suggesting changes.

Thirdly, the participants should be introduced to the program content. Before adults can begin discussing a theme intelligently and purposively they need an informational foundation. The teacher at this point provides a short lecture. Ideas about the midlife crisis expressed in this article may be summarized. The teacher should also consult other published materials on the midlife crisis when preparing the introductory lecture.

Discussion is the next key word for the first session. Following the lecture the participants should be encouraged to respond to the lecture by asking questions and making observations. When questions are asked, the effective teacher of adults usually turns the questions back to the group, except in cases of questions that ask for clarification or factual information. In case the participants are reticent about responding to the lecture, the teacher should have a prepared list of questions to stimulate response. These questions should be addressed to the group at large and not to any individual. If adults do not wish to respond, honor their feelings. At all costs avoid the "schooling" approach of coercing responses.

When a discussion does not result as a consequence of the lecture, the teacher moves on to the next task. If a discussion does ensue, the teacher must keep an eye on the clock. The third key word for the first session is projects. This part of the first session requires twenty to thirty minutes. The teacher asks the participants to form several small teams. Once the teams have been formed, the teams are asked to volunteer for taking instructional responsiblities for most of the remaining sessions in the program. The teacher should note that he will furnish assistance to the teams. The session concludes when the teams have volunteered to take charge of the remaining sessions. And...the session should conclude on time! It is ideal that the teacher be available for consultation after the session has concluded.

Session #2

The writer's research of the literature concerning the midlife crisis has carried him quite frequently to the topic of depression and brain chemistry.[15] The onset of physiological decline in the middle years, it is hypothesized, may be linked to changes in brain chemistry. It is

for this reason that the model program includes a lecture by a physician (preferably a psychiatrist) on depression, brain chemistry, and psychopharmacology. The physician should address the medical treatment of depression by means of chemotherapy. A word of caution: the physician should be encouraged to refrain from complicated medical terminology insofar as this is possible and to speak in terms that will be understood by the average layman.

The decision to place the lecture in session two is fundamentally utilitarian. The teams of participants that volunteer to take responsibility for sessions four through nine need a few weeks to study and prepare. (A lecture, as noted in the program outline, is scheduled for session three to serve the same utilitarian purpose).

The teacher should make arrangements for session two. The services of a physician or psychiatrist should be secured several weeks in advance. The topic of newer approaches to the medical treatment of endogenous depression is one that is usually fascinating for the adult learner.

After the question and answer period in session two, three very brief progress reports should be forthcoming from the leaders of the teams responsible for sessions four, five, and six. This calls attention to the future topics and ordinarily stimulates increased interest on the part of the learners.

Session #3

Suggestions concerning session three of the model program are almost identical to the observations made relating to session two. For this session the teacher should schedule a resource person to present a lecture on counseling techniques. A psychologist, counselor, or a person educated and experienced in counseling should be scheduled for the lecture by the teacher. The task of the clinical psychologist is to explain what happens typically when a person seeks the help of a counselor.

Session #4

Many of the subtle nuances of the midlife crisis are not reported in the research documentation of adult developmental psychology. These nuances are expressed vividly, however, in fictional works of high literary quality. It is suggested that a team of participants study, for example, Saul Bellow's Herzog.[16] One of the members of the team presents an overview of the plot of the novel; another team member gives a report which analyzes the main character in terms of the midlife crisis. All of the team members should contribute something to both of the reports.

The participants divide into small groups after the presentations and spend some time discussing the reports. A recorder in each group takes notes of the discussion and, after the buzz sessions, shares the gist of the discussion with all of the learners. Time permitting, a general discussion takes place.

Session #5

Session five is similar to session four. Following the reports on John Updike's The Centaur[17], for example, a reaction panel addresses the issues raised in the reports. A reaction panel usually consists of three members who have been recruited prior to the session to respond spontaneously to the presentations. The panel functions under the guidance of a moderator. Typically the reaction panel leads into a general discussion among all program participants moderated by the teacher.

Session #6

Allusions to critical periods in life, and to the sense of personal finitude and being squeezed by time are found very frequently in poetry. Poetic symbolism at times provides more profound insights into the human condition at midlife than the research literature in adult psychology or novels.

A symposium on symbols of the midlife crisis in poetry is the principal feature of session six. A moderator introduces each of the speakers and offers a summary after the last speech.

It is not necessary for the learners who are responsible for the session to limit their studies to particular poets. Nor is it required to compare biographical data about poets to their works, although this is perhaps the more sophisticated approach to th topic. Sometimes the participants are stimulated to more reflective thinking and keener insights when they are exposed to a variety of poems created by a number of artists. An open discussion follows the symposium.

Sessions #7 and #8

Two teams are responsible for preparing reports based on interviews of two sets of subjects. Two sessions are scheduled in order to obtain comparative data between two groups. The discussion period following the report in session eight should be spent in consideration of the second report itself and the relationship between the first and second reports.

The interview approach to the study of the midlife crisis is highly effective in terms of participant interest and response. The teacher should provide help to the interview teams by way of assisting in the construction of a brief interview schedule. Members of the teams are responsible for identifying and interviewing a small (12-15 total) sample of interviewees.

Session #10

The final session of the model program is oriented toward bringing together the most significant learnings of the previous sessions in a

practical manner. The teacher should divide the participants in small groups. Each group is assigned the task of listing ways of negotiating the midlife crisis. After a discussion period of 30-45 minutes, the teacher asks for reports from the groups. The teacher may wish to bring closure to the program with a brief summarizing lecture.

Further Suggestions for Program Implementation

It is appropriate, perhaps, to conclude this article with several suggestions relating to the implementation of the program. The suggestions are brief and to the point.

1. Variability of Material Resources

It has already been stated that the model program must be modified to respond to the peculiar requirements of a given situation. This advice must be underscored once again. Any attempt to implement the model program exactly as it appears above is programmed for failure. The need for program modification may be particularly pressing in the area of material resources. In the setting of a public library, for example, the teacher may find it more suitable to rely solely on biographical materials instead of novels. In a church setting the teacher may wish to organize two or three sessions around books that are oriented toward religious responses to the midlife crisis. In the setting of a division of continuing education for women, the teacher may find it useful to identify novels whose central characters are women. Again, the teacher may have access to a film that communicates more effectively than the materials itemized in the model program.

2. Active Participation

All participants in the program should be encouraged to work as members of the various teams. They should not be coerced, however, to take active parts in the program. In many cases adults who are reticent about collaborative learning will drop out of programs when they feel maneuvered by the teacher into unfamiliar roles. It should be anticipated, then, that some adult learners will simply remain inactive, at least until trust formation occurs and they feel more comfortable in the learning environment.

3. Psychological Climate

The teacher should gradually facilitate the creation of an "open" psychological atmosphere for learning. This atmosphere is characterized by trust, respect for personal privacy, and sensitivity to personal feelings. At the same time, the teacher should discreetly encourage self-revealment as opposed to self-concealment. In other words, the climate should develop to the stage where trust, respect, and sensitivity among the learners lead naturally to the sharing of personal feelings as well as ideas.

4. Physical Environment

Adult learners are very concerned about comfortable physical surroundings. Typically they need more light and better light due to a decline of visual acuity in the adult years. They are extremely sensitive to room temperature and ventilation. Acoustics must be considered in the selection of a learning site. (As they age adults also experience a decline of auditory acuity). Because of a loss of muscle elasticity in the adult years, adults require more comfortable chairs than are ususally provided in secondary and college classrooms. In short, it is not possible to lend too much attention to the physical comfort of the learners.

5. Teacher Input

Active participation on the part of the learners is frequently forestalled by a teacher who talks too much and too long. The teacher must be patient, therefore, and restrain himself from intervening too much in the processes of the program. Speed of learning slows down as a person gets older; the decline of power to learn is negligible. Restraint is the watchword when things seem to get bogged down in a morass.

6. Serendipity

It may surprise some teachers that the sessions in the model program do not begin with statements of educational objectives. In a program of the type described in these pages it is perhaps best to allow for maximum serendipity --- the unplanned and fortuitous occurrence of good things. Give serendipity a chance. To identify behaviorally-stated objectives for the type of program described above sometimes stifles participant activity and imposes tunnel vision on the adult learners. It should be noted also that the teacher who allows for maximum serendipity must be able, to a high degree, to cope with ambiguity.

Conclusion

Gerald Nachman's humorous essay "The Menopause That Refreshes" concerns his personal crisis over not having experienced the midlife crisis.[18] For many people, however, the midlife crisis is not a laughing matter. Adult education programs, it is argued, can help many adults negotiate the crisis with less pain and more coping skill. This is not to say that education should displace therapeutic approaches to the midlife crisis. But educational programs can contribute much as mechanism of "preventive medicine." In essence the model program described above represents a means of addressing the growing need for community mental health education.

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